Safe Schools Foster Improved Student Learning

Everyone wants safe schools for their children. Current research shows that the definition of "safe" involves three areas that school facilities planning groups should consider:

➤ Potential physical hazards
➤ Environmental conditions of the site and of the building
➤ Crime/violence prevention

Some research findings and resources are provided below:

➤ The California Department of Education provides a guide to help districts review certain health and safety requirements. The guide identifies potential physical hazards and environmental safety conditions, such as proximity to airports, transmission lines, railroads, underground pipelines, and propane tanks.[1]

➤ Potable water, fire safety, adequate lavatories, security systems, and good communication systems for use in emergencies are important priorities for schools as they plan for the health and safety of students.[2]

➤ Concern about traffic and street crossings is among the most commonly cited reasons parents do not let their children walk to school or engage in free play on the streets.[3]

➤ Several studies have determined that children suffer significant health consequences from excessive heat; inadequate heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems; mold and other biological hazards; pest infestations; lead and other toxic hazards; and overcrowding beyond the stated capacity of the school structure.[4]

➤ Research repeatedly shows the detrimental impact of high levels of lead and poor indoor air quality in classrooms.[5]

➤ One study of the Los Angeles Unified School District showed that a school's compliance with health and safety regulations can lead, on average, to a 36-point increase in California Academic Performance Index scores.[6]

➤ Students who attend small schools have a stronger sense of identity and belonging, of being connected to a community, than students who attend large schools. Additionally, the full range of negative social behavior—from classroom disruption to assault—is far less common in small schools, traditional and new, than it is in large schools.[7,8]

➤ The practice of "crime prevention through environmental design" embraces three proven concepts to make school sites safer: natural surveillance, natural access control, and territoriality. Simple, low-cost measures—for example, those involving furniture layouts, campus lighting, landscaping, reconfiguration of access points, and establishment of clear borders—are basic first steps to reducing crime on campus.[9]

➤ Schools with better building conditions have up to 14 percent lower student suspension rates.[10]

Notes

1. California Department of Education, School Facilities Planning Division, *School Site Selection and Approval Guide* (Sacramento: CDE Press, 2000).
2. Glen I. Earthman, *Prioritization of 31 Criteria for School Building Adequacy* (Baltimore, MD: American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Maryland, 2004).
3. Committee on Environmental Health, "The Built Environment: Designing Communities to Promote Physical Activity in Children," *Pediatrics* 123, no. 6 (2009): 1591–98.
4. Megan Sandel, "The Impact of the Physical Condition of School Facilities on Students' Short Term and Long Term Health," in *Expert Report: Williams v. State of California, 2002* (San Francisco: Superior Court of California, 2005).
5. Robert Corley, "The Condition of California School Facilities and Policies Related to Those Conditions," in *Expert Report: Williams v. State of California, 2002* (San Francisco: Superior Court of California, 2005).
6. Jack Buckley, Mark Schneider, and Yi Shang, *Los Angeles Unified School District School Facilities and Academic Performance* (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2004).
7. Kathleen Cotton, *New Small Learning Communities: Findings from Recent Literature* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001).
8. Joe Nathan and Karen Febey, *Smaller, Safer, Saner Successful Schools* (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2001).
9. Tod Schneider, "CPTED 101: Crime Prevention through Environmental Design—the Fundamentals for Schools" (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, 2010).
10. Stephen Boese and John Shaw, *New York State School Facilities and Student Health, Achievement, and Attendance: A Data Analysis Report* (Albany, NY: Healthy Schools Network, Inc., 2005).

For more information, contact the California Department of Education, School Facilities Services Division, at 916-322-2470.